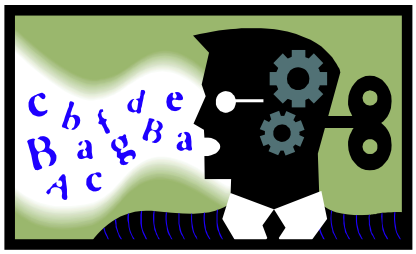
Best Practices:
The Use of Native Language During Instructional & Non-Instructional Time

"Of course, learning English and learning it well is absolutely essential for academic and future life success, but the assumption that one must discard one's identity along the way needs to be challenged. There is nothing shameful in knowing a language other than English. In fact becoming bilingual can benefit individuals and our country in general."

--Sonia Nieto[1]



As Indiana continues to become more culturally and linguistically diverse, nowhere has this change been more acutely reflected than in the state's classrooms. Data for school year 2003-2004 collected by the Indiana Department of Education, Division of Language Minority and Migrant Programs, reveals that enrollment of limited English proficient (LEP) students in public schools has more than doubled in the last five years and that over 200 minority languages are represented in our student population.[2] Undoubtedly, today's educators confront new challenges in providing English language learners (ELLs) with an appropriate, effective, and meaningful education.

In the book *Meeting the Needs of Second Language Learners*, Judith Lessow-Hurley summarizes the benefits of providing ELLs with native language support in five brief research findings:

1. Concepts and skills that students learn in another language transfer to English
2. Strong native language development helps students learn English
3. School-related tasks require a sophisticated grasp of the English language and native language support can help students develop their language and literacy skills
4. Students who are highly proficient in two languages appear to have academic advantages over monolingual students
5. Supporting native language bolsters students' self-esteem.[3]

Research shows that when the students' native language is used correctly in educational programs, it can accelerate the second language acquisition process and help foster academic success. In allowing students to use their native language in the classroom—speaking it, writing it, reading it, and even teaching others to speak some of it—educators empower ELLs.[4] Moreover, students can feel recognized and validated in the classroom, which results in a strong sense of self.

However, students' attitudes about school, their own views of themselves as learners, and their feelings about education in general are all shaped by what happens *both in the classroom and throughout the school environment*.[5] The "school environment" includes, but is not limited to, riding the school bus, breakfast or lunch times, recess, passing periods, and school events. Educators should not prohibit language minority students from using their native language in these non-instructional settings, as long as the conversation is not off

topic, offensive to others, or disruptive. Reprimands for these instances should be for students' behavior rather than for native language use and should be handled on a case-by-case basis.

The Indiana Department of Education has sought the guidance of several organizations and government agencies regarding policies or regulations on the use of native language during non-instructional time. One of these organizations is the *Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages* (TESOL) Association, which provides several position statements regarding people's right "to retain and use their native languages in public or private without interference on the part of any governmental agency, regulation, or statutes,"[6] and emphasizes that they "value and encourage multilingualism in all learners at every age and level." TESOL recognizes the global community we live in and the interconnectedness of language and culture. They assert that the ability to communicate in more than one language "is more important than ever in promoting international cooperation and goodwill, and in dispelling misunderstanding and mistrust."[7]

English language learners face many challenges in order to succeed in American schools. It is crucial for educators to provide socioculturally supportive *classrooms and school environments* that allow students to develop linguistically, academically, and cognitively.[8] Students who maintain a positive ethnic identity as they acculturate and who become fluent in two or more languages are more likely to have better mental health, do well in school, and graduate from high school than those who completely assimilate into the mainstream culture.[1]

The Cultural Identity of English Language Learners

Many new English language learners (ELLs) enter mainstream or content area classrooms at all ages and grade levels with limited English proficiency. Under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, educating students from various cultural, ethnic, linguistic, academic, and socioeconomic backgrounds is the responsibility of the whole school. Collaboration among administrators, mainstream educators, bilingual teachers, and support staff is expected in order to meet the unique needs of these students.

A recent article co-authored by two experienced ELL teachers and published in *Voices in the Middle*, a journal of the National Council of Teachers of English, explores the need to recognize and validate multiple cultural identities in the classroom community and to develop positive student-teacher relationships in order to strengthen students' sense of worth and, ultimately, their academic performance. In addition, educators should try to understand and support the cultural norms of diverse learners so they can create a safe and nurturing environment, which motivates students to take the necessary risks to be successful.[9] Along these lines, knowing that many ELLs define their "cultural identity" by the *language* and *ethnicity* of the sociocultural group to which they feel connected supports the necessity to include students' native language during instructional and non-instructional time.

Although the main purpose of language development programs is to assist students in acquiring English, it is beneficial to find meaningful ways to incorporate students' native language in the classroom and the school environment. Some examples for in-classroom support include: employing the services of bilingual staff to assist in explaining content materials, preteaching or checking for understanding concepts in the native language; utilizing native language books, magazines, films, or other materials relating to the topic or theme of a lesson; allowing students to keep reading logs or journals in their native language; and pairing students with same native language, but different levels of English proficiency, which may help alleviate the anxiety and stress of newcomer ELLs.[5] The school as a whole can encourage educators to use curricula that reflect the culture, values, interests, experiences, and concerns of language minority students. Staff development with a focus on second language acquisition, appropriate instructional modifications or adaptations, and other legal guidelines regarding limited English proficient students should be provided. Communicating effectively with language minority parents is also crucial. Holding special parent activities, conducting home visits, providing interpreters for conferences and events, and translating information of their children's progress into their native language can help bridge the language gap between the school and the home.

The *National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs* (NCELA) encourages native language use in schools and the maintenance of the native language in the home and describes it as a life-long benefit.[10] Maintaining the native language is important because it helps students value their cultural heritage, develop a positive self-concept, and retain links to family and other community members. Additionally, literacy in the native language correlates positively with the acquisition of literacy in a second language[11] and better employment opportunities in the U.S. and overseas exist for those who are fluent in English and another language.

When native language instructional support *cannot* be provided, as may be the case for some ELLs in Indiana, there are several characteristics that the language program or mainstream classroom can focus on to make a significant difference in students' academic achievement. Virginia Collier, leading researcher in second language acquisition, provides the following suggestions:

1. Second language should be taught through academic content
2. A conscious focus on teaching learning strategies needed to develop thinking skills and problem-solving abilities
3. Continuous support for staff development emphasizing activation of students' prior knowledge, respect for students' home language and culture, cooperative learning, interactive and discovery learning, intense and meaningful cognitive/academic development, and ongoing assessment using multiple measures.[7]

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS CALL THE
INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIVISION OF LANGUAGE MINORITY AND MIGRANT PROGRAMS
(317) 232-0555 OR
INDIANA TOLL FREE (800) 382-9962

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[2] Harvey, Lauren. "The State of K-12 ESL in Indiana: Accomplishments, Issues, and Challenges." *INTESOL Journal* 1.1 (Fall 2004): 7-12.

For the most recent language minority student enrollment data, access the Division of Language Minority and Migrant Programs website at http://www.doe.state.in.us/lmmp/pdf/languageminoritysummary.pdf.

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